




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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EMERGENCY SERVICES REFORM AMENDMENT BILL; STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE BILL; MARINE RESCUE QUEENSLAND BILL; DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (5.13 pm): 'Queensland is the most disaster affected state in Australia.' Those nine words set the scene in each of the four explanatory notes for the Marine Rescue Queensland Bill 2023, the Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill 2023, the State Emergency Service Bill 2023 and the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024. I will speak to the cognate debate on those four bills.

Whilst this government may think it is appropriate to cognate these four important bills, I think it is important to acknowledge the thousands of Queenslanders—including nearly 70,000 volunteers—who are directly affected by these bills. I cannot go on without calling out the actions of this government for what they are. Across this state, there are people who owe their lives to a volunteer. The impact that the brave actions of those volunteers have on families, on communities and on our state simply cannot be understated, yet we have a government that restricts debate on four—yes, four—pieces of legislation that directly affect those volunteers. There are 245 pages contained in these bills alone, nearly 140 pages of explanatory notes and 108 pages of committee reports, but the number that really matters is that almost 70,000 people put themselves at risk and do not even get paid to do it. The fact that members will get just 10 minutes to speak on four bills underlies what I am saying. Members contributing to this debate will get just over two minutes to speak on each bill and I think that is a disgrace.

The independent review into QFES commissioned by this government recommended that reforms be undertaken in a staged approach not once, but twice. Even the explanatory notes to the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill claim that 'legislative reform is being progressed in two stages'. Yet today not only is debate on these bills being restricted, but four bills have been bundled up and effectively given just one hour of debate each. What is even sadder is the fact that this is no surprise given what we have seen from this government in relation to these bills. I will go into that in more detail later in my contribution.

The Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 was referred to the Community Safety and Legal Affairs Committee, whose sole recommendation was that the bill be passed. The Marine Rescue Queensland Bill 2023, the Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill 2023 and the State Emergency Service Bill 2023 were all referred to the Community Support and Services Committee, which recommended that all three bills be passed. Additionally, in reference to the Marine Rescue Queensland Bill 2023, the committee recommended public education and information sessions to effectively engage and inform volunteers. The LNP members of both committees issued statements of reservation relating to all four bills, mainly in response to concerns raised by volunteers.

In total there are 153 references to volunteers across the four bills, and today I rise to speak on behalf of those volunteers and paid staff and the Queenslanders who rely on them. In order to really examine these bills thoroughly, we need to look at the past and their origins. There are a total of four reviews into the delivery of emergency services in Queensland: the 2018 *Review into volunteer marine rescue organisations in Queensland*, known as the Blue Water Review; the 2020 *Sustaining the SES—partnering for change* review; the 2021 *Independent review of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services*; and the 2023 *IGEM Review of Queensland's disaster management arrangements*.

Despite Queensland's reliance on these organisations, we have again seen a government that has failed to listen and failed to act and then, at the last minute, shut down the voices of Queenslanders. The objectives of the Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill 2023 are: to ensure civil liability protections continue to apply to the SES, including members, and to make those protections apply to Marine Rescue Queensland and its members, noting that members who do not transfer to Marine Rescue Queensland will be left to rely on existing protections; to formally establish the State Disaster Management Group within the Disaster Management Act 2023; and other consequential amendments to facilitate the government's goals. I will speak further on the concerns we hold around this bill later in my contribution.

The overall objective of the State Emergency Service Bill 2023 is to establish the SES by relocating and expanding upon a number of provisions outlined in the Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990 to facilitate search and rescue operations, preparation for and response to disasters or events, and other required activities. This bill also includes provisions to align Marine Rescue Queensland and the State Emergency Service under the control of the Queensland Police Service—an issue I will address shortly.

The relationship between local government and SES units is well-known, and quite often council employees fill vital roles within the SES as part of their employment. In fact, in their submission to the committee the LGAQ refers to the 'operational and financial obligations often incurred by local governments in supporting local SES units'. Whilst I acknowledge that feedback has resulted in a requirement for local governments to agree to the establishment of an SES unit, there remains what the Brisbane City Council described as a 'significant risk' for councils.

This bill empowers the Commissioner of Police to discipline, suspend or terminate an SES member. While no-one would question the need to have mechanisms in place to ensure proper behaviour and facilitate complaints, the fact is that, as a local government employee, workers are subject to relevant industrial instruments, including enterprise agreements, that set out the relevant processes for matters such as suspension and termination. What we are left with is a situation that could, according to the Brisbane City Council, result in a 'legal and financial liability for councils'. Especially given this government's reliance on the union movement, I call on the minister to provide assurances that this potential liability has been addressed and outline how this has been achieved.

The objective of the Marine Rescue Queensland Bill 2023 is to establish Marine Rescue Queensland as a statewide marine service, along with consequential amendments to facilitate the government's objectives and amendments to facilitate the objectives of the other bills included in this cognate debate.

I referred earlier to the government's commitment to a staged approach when it came to reform and, given this process has been underway for 5½ years, there was ample time for a staged process based on consultation. Instead, confusion reigns supreme, and the very volunteers that this government refers to state that this government's actions have left them feeling disengaged and that they had lost trust. In fact, a senior Queensland police officer told constituents of mine that the process had been 'handled poorly to start with' and that people who had made decisions did not have the authority to make those decisions.

Make no mistake, the creation of a single statewide marine rescue service is widely supported, but this government's handling of this process has been nothing short of disastrous. For this government to refer to valuing and respecting volunteers is a complete slap in the face when, as the treasurer of the South Stradbroke VMR unit told the committee, it has been 'extremely difficult to achieve transparent, accountable communication with the state government'.

Let's consider where we are today. Just two months before the deadline for this government's commitment is due, Marine Rescue Queensland does not exist. Volunteers have been told that most of the important decisions have been made in the last six months, and those in charge of implementing that commitment have admitted they are struggling to meet the deadline. In fact, at a meeting in Ayr on 10 April this year, volunteers were told that if this legislation were not passed by 30 April—as in today—the 1 July deadline would not be met and that the first groups to transition to Marine Rescue Queensland

would be 'crash test dummies'. As recently as February, three of those 10 groups had not been identified and, just a few weeks ago, those units had not even received a draft agreement from this government. What a disgrace that a senior minister in this government has stood by while volunteers felt disengaged and devalued.

Over \$27 million has been spent to date, but a far greater expense is the damage that has been done to volunteers across this state. Today, volunteers and community members who have fundraised to support those volunteer organisations still face uncertainty regarding the funds raised in communities across the state. After 5½ years we know that as recently as this month, the Australian Tax Office had not signed off on the proposed ownership model and that questions still surround how locally raised funds will be held and how those funds will be dispersed.

Is it any wonder that almost 80 per cent of Marine Rescue volunteers in this state have not signed up to be a part of this government's plan, given the way their fellow volunteers have been treated? It is this appalling treatment of volunteers and the lack of information which means that today there are still many questions to be answered. On behalf of those volunteers, I will put their questions to the minister. Those questions include: is there a contingency plan should a transition and transfer of asset agreement not be achieved by 1 July this year? Is there a plan to ensure marine rescue services are continued in areas where sufficient volunteers do not transition to maintain operational capability? Has MRQ a plan to ensure marine rescue services are continued in areas where sufficient volunteers do not transition to maintain operational capability, especially given there are indications that up to 25 per cent of volunteers may not transition? Given that surveys of existing facilities have been conducted, what is the cost of required upgrades and is this amount fully funded? How will the boating public be kept up to date with arrangements in their area, especially given that some units will be funded by government to provide assistance and others, potentially close by, will operate on the old model of membership or user pays? When will documents such as agreements and transition requirements be made available to organisations? What vessel logging system will be used? How will this government manage three entities?

From my discussions with both coastguard and VMR units across Queensland, there are a significant number of units in both organisations that will not transition to this new entity. I think the minister should explain to the parliament how he will continue to manage three separate entities going forward, particularly in terms of funding, purchase and upkeep of boats as well. Surely a government that claims to value volunteers has a responsibility to provide those volunteers with the information they need. These are simple questions that should have been answered by now, and I call on the minister to provide those answers during his reply. The fact that these questions still remain unanswered also illustrates perfectly the arrogance and disrespect shown by this government in guillotining the debate.

The objectives of the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 are: to amend the Fire and Emergency Services Act to establish Queensland Fire and Rescue and the Rural Fire Service Queensland as two separate services within the Queensland Fire Department; to rename the Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990 as the Fire Services Act 1990; to provide further structure for key positions, including their responsibilities within the Queensland Fire Department; to enhance the legal status of rural fire brigades and provide civil liability protections to brigades and their members; to amend the Disaster Management Act to enhance disaster management arrangements and the Queensland Reconstruction Authority Act to expand the QRA's functions; and to establish a requirement to install smoke alarms in caravans and motorised caravans.

From the outset, I want to acknowledge the members and supporters of rural fire brigades who have contacted me expressing concerns about this bill. Prior to addressing concerns raised by those people, I want to speak briefly about the amendments relating to caravans because those amendments highlight perfectly the results of a lack of consultation. It is without doubt that smoke alarms save lives, so, on the face of it, making smoke alarms compulsory in caravans makes sense, especially in the midst of a housing crisis where more and more Queenslanders are living in caravans. A glaring omission was identified in this bill by Caravanning Queensland—namely, that non-registered caravans on holiday or permanent sites are not covered by the legislation. This omission was identified during the committee process and, whilst I call on the minister to ensure the omission is addressed, it really does illustrate the need for consultation.

Sadly, consultation was also overlooked when it comes to amendments relating to the Rural Fire Service. As one Rural Fire Service volunteer put it, 'volunteers have been lied to, at worst, or been seriously misguided by wrong information disseminated by the minister'. Frankly, it comes as no surprise that volunteers are feeling betrayed and angry when this government gave them seven days—yes, seven days—in which to make a submission to the committee process. After I contacted the chair

of the committee I was advised that late submissions would be accepted, and I welcome that, but what was really needed was a suitable time frame for volunteers, their representatives and the communities they protect to have their say.

Just like their fellow volunteers in the Marine Rescue area, members of rural fire brigades across the state have lost trust in this government. The fact is they were promised so much, but so little has been delivered, including information. Yet again, there are unanswered questions and uncertainty and, yet again, that is in total contrast to the government's mantra of respecting and valuing volunteers.


Whilst brigades and members welcome the extension of civil liability protections and the granting of necessary powers, this government has overlooked completely what is important to volunteers and even their background. One volunteer, who also happens to be a lawyer, condemns the process as 'deception that is occurring to parliament, to volunteers and to the communities in which those volunteers live', and cites the need for brigades to seek independent legal advice to clarify their position as an illustration of the disrespect shown to volunteers. That legal advice is based around one of the most contentious issues in this bill.

The advice provided to a brigade is that: the brigade's current status as an independent body will end on 1 July and all assets will automatically become owned by the state, something that was denied as recently as last week; from 1 July, every single brigade owned asset becomes the property of the Rural Fire Service, again in direct contrast to what volunteers have been told; and that currently each brigade is a charitable organisation, meaning the government's actions will result in volunteers having to breach the conditions attached to donations and bequests potentially requiring intervention by the Supreme Court.

We have another brigade where volunteers have now been informed that post 1 July brigades will effectively be a government entity and therefore subject to legal requirements relating to office size, goods storage, the furniture in the offices and even the equipment in their kitchens. During the independent review of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services, it was revealed that many sheds owned by QFES were not connected to electricity or running water and some did not even have a toilet.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hart): Can I ask you to withdraw the unparliamentary language used before in the quote?

Mr LAST: I withdraw.

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (6.22 pm), continuing: It was a situation confirmed by the then commissioner. It is an absolute insult that the volunteers we rely on are expected to work out of facilities akin to the Third World. While I am sure they would welcome facility upgrades, perhaps the minister would like to advise what the cost of the upgrades are, how they will be funded and when they will be completed. Again, we have a situation where there are more questions than answers. Again, these are questions that volunteers deserve answers to.

Concerns have also been raised with regard to training opportunities for rural firefighters, incident controller shortages, fire suppression support at large structural fires and even who is in charge of an incident. Both volunteer and professional firefighters and their communities deserve answers. These issues are not of their making. They are the sole responsibility of this minister and a government that not only guillotines debate but also limits the ability of Queenslanders to have their say when it comes to the services that they literally trust with their lives.

As I did earlier, I will put questions to the minister that have been raised by Queenslanders and, frankly, they are questions that deserve to be answered during the minister's response. Will the minister guarantee that local brigades will have access to the money that they have previously raised to spend locally as determined by the local brigade? Will the minister guarantee that the state government will not forcibly acquire rural brigade funds and hold them centrally? Will the minister guarantee that there will not be another layer of bureaucracy put in place for local rural fire brigades to access their locally raised funds? Will the minister guarantee that local rural fire brigades will be able to continue raising money locally, access the money locally and determine locally how the brigade will spend that money? Will the minister guarantee that volunteers will not have to wade through layers of bureaucracy just to receive the authority to purchase basic items to ensure the proper functioning of their brigades? Further on that particular point, will there be caps or a ceiling on the amounts that brigades can expend without having to seek further approvals?

Another contentious issue relating to this bill is the structure of the new Queensland Fire Department and, particularly, how brigades and members of the new Rural Fire Service Queensland fit into that structure. Ninety-three per cent of Queensland is protected by the Rural Fire Service, made up mostly of volunteers. Those volunteers and those communities deserve certainty when it comes to funding essential services. As the examples I have given clearly demonstrate, there is no certainty under this bill and there is a clear lack of respect for the life- and property-saving tasks undertaken by the Rural Fire Service. For those reasons, the LNP opposition will be opposing clause 31 of this bill—that is, the establishment of the two separate entities: Queensland Fire and Rescue and Rural Fire Service Queensland.

As I have mentioned previously, a common objective of these bills is to bring several entities under the control of the Queensland Police Service and to reallocate responsibility for Queensland's disaster management functions to the Police Commissioner. It is a fact that under the current minister we saw police numbers go backwards. We saw reforms put in place that later needed to be wound back, and we have seen the youth crime crisis envelope the whole state.

Many Queenslanders, both directly affected by these bills and in no way affected, have expressed concerns about the additional functions being added to a Police Service that is already stretched beyond breaking point and have questioned whether these changes will divert police resources away from their core functions of law and order. These concerns are amplified by the fact that this government has committed in these bills to increase staff numbers to address the additional functions, whilst recently we have seen record numbers of police leaving and numbers plummeting. What all Queenslanders, and our police especially, deserve is for the minister to explain how these additional responsibilities will be handled without reverting resources from fighting crime and without putting an even larger strain on our Police Service.

As shadow minister, my responsibility is to ensure the best outcomes for Queenslanders. Whilst I have raised concerns on behalf of Queenslanders, I will also acknowledge positive elements of these bills. Perhaps the most important of those elements is civil liability protections. The fact is that responding to an emergency, whether it threatens people or property, comes with risks. When time is of the essence and the responders themselves are in harm's way, mistakes can be made. In the vast majority of cases it is not because of ill will—a fact proven by the responders rushing towards an incident to help others rather than running away to protect themselves.

It is now just over 11 years since the Malone inquiry recommended that volunteers be provided with protections under both criminal and civil law. Whilst we would all hope that those protections are not needed, 11 years later volunteers throughout our state will finally have the protection that they deserve.

In times of crisis, or in response to a disaster, Queenslanders deserve a disaster management system that works and is built on local knowledge and proper resourcing. For those reasons, amendments relating to disaster management are generally supported by those on this side of the House.

Queensland may well be the most disaster affected state, but it is our emergency services who make the difference. Regardless of whether they be professionals or volunteers who put others first, every Queenslander values the contribution they make to our communities. I want to put on the record both my personal thanks and the thanks of those on this side of the House for the work that they do.

During my time as a police officer and as an area director of Emergency Management Queensland, I have seen my fair share of responses to natural disasters and incidents and I have witnessed the selflessness and dedication of both professional and volunteer responders. It is not only a government responsibility to ensure the response to an incident or disaster is handled as well as possible but also the responsibility of the government to ensure those who respond are respected, supported, valued and properly resourced. I note that the vast majority of the amendments contained in these bills are due to reviews and that the intention is to deliver the best response possible when Queenslanders need help.

My issue, and the issue of my colleagues, is not with the intent. Our issue is with the way this government has gone about this process. To have people with 50 years of service as volunteers talking about walking away is not only heartbreaking but also has the potential to deprive the next generation of volunteers, and our communities of a pool of vital knowledge and experience.

It is not just those who have dedicated a large portion of their life to protecting their communities. When referring to his experience dealing with this government's processes, a 32-year-volunteer from my electorate said, 'Why should I bother putting myself at risk? The government doesn't care about me.'

They only care about PowerPoint displays and cutting ribbons.’ That statement is a sad indictment on this government. Throughout the state, especially in regional Queensland, we have a proud history of going to the aid of others and of putting ourselves in harm’s way for strangers—or, as some might say, of looking out for our mates.

At the heart of this issue are volunteers who save lives and property. It is a fact that after a shortened debate this government will pass these bills. It is a fact that, despite a process that was promised to be staged and apparently focused on respecting and valuing volunteers, and despite the best efforts of many on this side of the House, these bills will be passed without those brave men and women receiving the answers they deserve. I call on the minister to provide the answers I have asked for here as part of this debate, to give assurances and, above all, to show respect. Queenslanders and those who respond in their time of need deserve that at the very least.